

COGDOP Response to IR-16 “Evaluating Program Adherence to the Principle of “Broad and General Preparation: for Doctoral Programs”
(August, 2010)

The Council of Graduate Departments of Psychology (COGDOP) appreciates the effort of CoA to set forth minimum standards for training programs. We agree that quality needs to be demonstrated and addressed as part of the review and re-accreditation process and we concur that such standards are important and necessary. We wish to challenge CoA to develop guidelines that are creative and inspirational supporting excellence rather than defining a minimum which risks becoming the over arching model. A concern that we have as educators is that minimum standards all too often become the example against which everything is measured and compared so that innovation is stifled and departure from the minimum model then requires justification. Moreover we are concerned that a consequence of establishing minimum standards is promotion of regression to the mean rather than striving for the highest standards. We wish to support pluralism and diversity in training in the context of excellence, and a commitment to quality, not mere demonstration of the minimum.

That said, COGDOP supports the view that students trained in professional programs should receive foundational training that provides them with a broad and general view of psychology as a discipline and an understanding of the historical underpinnings of key constructs and research methods. However, this broad and general training should not be promoted at the expense of emerging evidence and methods, high quality focused learning, and specialized training. We maintain that a balanced and integrated curriculum is needed with broad training that can occur through specialized courses in which, for example, students are encouraged to think critically regarding how a particular domain (e.g., biological bases of behavior) is relevant to and integrated with more specialized content (e.g., gerontology). A singular focus on “broad and general” training risks diluting graduate training, potentially producing graduates who are mediocre in their knowledge across a number of areas, rather than producing graduates who are experts.

Further, COGDOP strongly disagrees with an approach that prescribes a list of ever expanding domains in which students must have completed coursework, or one that details what defines graduate level coursework within the domain. Although this IR acknowledges that “It is recognized that there are a variety of ways in which programs may achieve these components of their program requirements,” increasingly CoA has implemented the notion of “broad and general” to mean completion of a list of prescribed courses within these domains. The current trend of the CoA to define not only the domains of knowledge that reflect “breadth” but also the type of texts and materials that define “graduate level” work is problematic as well. This approach is at variance with the CoA’s statement of values in their Guidelines and Principles (G&P). Taking directly from the G&P:

“The accreditation process involves judging the degree to which a program has achieved the goals and objectives of its stated training model. That is, an accreditation body should not explicitly prescribe a program’s educational goals or the processes by which they should be reached; rather it should judge the degree to which a program achieves outcomes and goals that

are consistent with its stated training model and with the guiding principles contained in this document (p. 2 & 3).” “The accreditation guidelines and principles are specifically intended to allow a program broad latitude in defining its philosophy or model of training (p. 4).”

COGDOP supports the ideas from the G&P that:

- 1) Departments should have academic freedom in how they design their program goals.
- 2) Departments should be judged in terms of how well they meet those program goals.
- 3) Thus, it is incumbent upon the specific training program to determine how a program of study addresses coverage of broad content area.
4. We support the view that broad and general should serve to provide important foundational knowledge, not simply survey the work of the past.

COGDOP is concerned that:

- 1) The current IR and its implementation do not allow programs sufficient latitude in designing curriculum and setting forth how the unique program goals are achieved.
- 2) Rather, the IR prescribes courses and content. We see the current trend of an expanding list of “broad and general” domains to be difficult, if not impossible, to manage in the context of excellent graduate training, particularly as new content areas are arising and will continue to arise (e.g., genetic bases of behavior) creating further strain on graduate programs.
- 3) While the intentions of the IR appear to address concerns about quality in education that COGDOP shares, the result is a set of mandates with potentially negative program and budget implications that serve to set the lowest standard rather than inspire programs to be creative and diverse.
- 4) An exclusive focus on “broad and general” training is antithetical to excellent graduate training. We wish to promote the view that while there is a role for survey courses, mandating programs to offer many diffuse survey courses does not serve the profession and we wish, instead to advocate high quality in-depth training in graduate students’ specialty areas consistent with the goals of the program.

We also are concerned that the present IR may have wide-ranging negative effects on other (non-accredited) areas within academic psychology departments (e.g., developmental, social, cognitive, and more). The frequent interpretation by CoA and site visitors that such guidelines necessitate a course in each substantive area, creates a situation in which faculty members in other areas of psychology must extensively contribute to the training of clinically oriented graduate students. As well, departments must hire faculty who can provide such instructional coverage thus diverting resources from other important areas. This has the unfortunate consequence of the clinical program’s needs driving the rest of the department and the evolution of programs that are generic and organized around instructional needs rather than program goals, excellence in training, disciplinary identity or specialty.